

A German riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma

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The definite re-election of Vladimir Putin in Russia will consolidate his authoritarian model of governance and assertive foreign policy for another six years. In Germany, the formation of a new government is to be expected after an unusually long time of coalition talks. The question will then turn towards the direction of Germany's *Ostpolitik* and the future of relations between Russia and the West.

In 1939 Winston Churchill famously remarked that he cannot forecast the actions of Russia: "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." The same could be said of Germany's *Ostpolitik*, which has left observers puzzled and perplexed in recent years. Previously and often simplistically explained by the catchwords "energy" and "business", Germany's role in the Ukraine conflict has seemingly defied all prior assumptions about Germany's special relationship with Russia and its purely geo-economic interests.

Eastern Europeans were bewildered to see Germany taking a leadership role, including the sanctions policy. For Russia, the fact that Germany emerged as its main adversary in the struggle over Ukraine has been an unexpected turn of events as well. For the United States, it was a pleasant surprise that Germany eventually walked the talk of greater international engagement, allowing the US to take a backseat in the conflict. Most surprised, however, were probably the Germans themselves, finding their country in the cockpit of a new geopolitical confrontation. Now, four years later, Germany has not given in or changed its stance, neither on the question of sanctions nor the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

Yet, this spring will present watchers of Russia and Germany another opportunity to read the tealeaves of German *Ostpolitik*: The uncontested re-election of Vladimir Putin in March will consolidate Russia's authoritarian model of governance and its assertive foreign policy for another six years. The formation of a new government in Germany is expected after an unusually long time of preparatory coalition talks. The question will then turn towards Germany's *Ostpolitik* and how it will develop in the near and mid-term future. Will the new government in Berlin continue with the status quo or will there be a change in its relations with Moscow?

Three approaches

Since German reunification, Germany's Russian policy has developed along three conceptual approaches: The special relationship approach, the value-based approach and the principled pragmatist approach. The special relationship approach is based on the idea of a unique bilateral bond between the two countries formed through historic, economic and energy ties that bypass relationships with other countries in terms of depth and quality. The prime example of this was Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Russian policy. The man-to-man friendship he developed with Putin, the then new Russian president, was as much about exploiting political and economic opportunities with Russia as it was about enhancing Germany's profile in Europe and towards the US. On par with France and Russia, Schröder re-positioned Germany in Europe and within the transatlantic relationship with his resounding "no" to the war in Iraq. Problematic policy issues with Russia – for instance the war in Chechnya – were left for Brussels to deal with. Relations with Eastern European states were subordinated to the relationship with Russia, especially in matters of energy policy.

An earlier variant of the special relationship approach was undertaken by Chancellor Helmut Kohl after German reunification. Here, the element of re-positioning Germany in Europe and towards the US had not yet played a role. On the contrary: shortly after German reunification, reassuring European neighbours and the US about the continuity of Germany's foreign policy was of paramount importance. Through European integration, Germany could prove that it was not a threat or striving for hegemony in Europe. The special relationship with Russia, hence, was marked by a strong notion of indebtedness and gratefulness for German reunification and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany, which was supported with credits and financial support towards Russia later during the Boris Yeltsin years.

The value-based approach emerged after the era of the special relationship as a result of a new awareness of Russian authoritarianism after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. This approach was mainly driven by representatives of the Green Party and the Christian Democratic Party. The value-based approach attempted to re-adjust policy towards Russia (with a strong focus on Russia's domestic constitution and civil society) as well as shift the focus of attention towards its Eastern European neighbours, those countries with which Germany should have a

relationship on the same footing as with Russia, with an awareness of Germany's historical responsibility also towards Eastern European states.

This approach has been criticised by proponents of the partnership approach for preventing the pragmatism and flexibility that is needed to keep the ball rolling with Russia. An overly value-based approach, they argue, creates a deadlock in policy-making since Russia is not going to change anytime soon, and any potential to expand its relationship with its Eastern neighbours is limited as long as EU and NATO membership are out of sight, and internal conflicts (fuelled by Russia) prohibit further rapprochement. Despite criticism, the value-based approach provided a long overdue – and necessary – correction to the special relationship approach which dominated Germany's Russia policy since reunification.

Finally, the principled pragmatist approach has become the signature feature of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Russian policy during her last term in office. While incorporating the value-based approach towards Russia's domestic situation and foreign policy, this approach nevertheless underlines the pragmatic necessity of engaging in dialogue with Russia – if only to keep channels of communication open in conflict-management, as for instance in Ukraine. For the first time, the principled pragmatist approach subordinated economic interests to political priorities by introducing sanctions against Russia. Yet, despite attempts to strengthen a common EU energy policy, Germany has been unwilling to sacrifice its own energy relations with Russia – this has manifested in the case of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

Yard stick

All three approaches in policy towards Russia in the past have two elements in common that will also define Germany's *Ostpolitik* in the future. First, Germany's Russian policy is as much about Russia as it is about Germany's foreign policy line in general. Russian policy has been a test case and a yardstick for measuring the parameters of Germany's foreign policy, that is to say, a projection surface for debates about German foreign policy between interests versus values, Germany's role in Europe, its relationship with its Eastern neighbours as well as the US.

Germany's *Ostpolitik* is hence one of the most instructive policy areas to observe major trends in German foreign policy. At times, German debates about the right policy towards Russia resemble a navel-gazing and self-reassurance about the principled lines of German foreign policy in the Post-Post-Cold War era more than a realist assessment of how to deal with a re-emerging

power like Russia. In terms of policy towards Russia, this has been problematic, since policy-making has not necessarily been tailored towards the specific circumstances of the Russian case, but to what was suitable for the inner-German discourse.

Second, the German-Russian relationship is never free from history, for better or for worse. This was particularly obvious during the Ukraine conflict. The Russian side has completely miscalculated Germany's response to the conflict, assuming that business and energy interests towards Russia would prevail. In addition, Russia attempted to create a historical-emotional bond with the German public by framing the annexation of Crimea as a reunification akin to German reunification, which Germany, out of acknowledgement, should approve like the Soviet Union did in 1990.

This historic analogy has dramatically backfired. As the former finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble provocatively put it, Russia's behaviour reminded Germany of its own behaviour in the late 1930s, rather than German reunification. Similarly, the main paradigm put forward by Merkel revolved around the notion of living in the 21st century and not the 20th century. Yet, Russia underestimated this historic dimension since from a Russian neo-realist worldview, norms and values are considered masquerade, not an authentic tenant of foreign policy.

Outdated template

Another example of how policy towards Russia is charged with historical analogies is the appropriation of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* as a template for a 21st century policy towards Russia, overlooking the fact that Brandt conducted *Ostpolitik* against the backdrop of a West Germany deeply anchored in the West and without any illusions about the domestic situation in the Soviet Union. As the Social Democratic (SPD) politician Rolf Mützenich noted in his criticism of an apologetic *Ostpolitik*: the Warsaw Genuflection happened in Warsaw, not in Moscow. Yet for proponents of the partnership policy with Russia, Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* remains the main reference point and template, demonstrating the lack of alternative approaches that would acknowledge the changed international environment in which both Germany and Russia operate.

Indeed, the foreign policy agendas of both Germany and Russia have expanded. Russia has turned away from Europe as the main reference point of its foreign policy and stepped onto the global stage, broadening the geographical scope of its activity that was previously limited to

Russia's immediate neighbourhood. Russia has again become a global player, involved in Syria, the Middle East, and the North Korean conflict. It is also accused of meddling in the domestic affairs of the US and European states, as well as in part of Latin America, Northern Africa, Afghanistan and the Western Balkans. Germany's declared willingness to engage more strongly in international affairs makes it impossible to treat Russia as a bilateral issue. Germany's new international role and responsibility in foreign affairs does not allow such an approach, especially in the context of strained relations with Russia. The new context is wider, bigger, and has far more intricacies and challenges; and there are limits to the policy of "compartmentalisation", i.e. separating areas of agreement from areas of disagreement. Germany's Russia policy, which ten years ago focused on Russia itself and its domestic developments, now has to develop a position towards Russia's foreign policy in other parts of the world.

Taking the three above-outlined conceptual approaches as blueprints, which path will Germany's future *Ostpolitik* travel in the near and medium-term future? For the above-mentioned reasons, a return to the special relationship approach seems inconceivable for most German politicians and the main parties in any government constellation, excluding the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and parts of Die Linke (The Left). Nevertheless, the uncertainty surrounding the coalition negotiations have raised questions about the continuity of Germany's policy towards Russia.

No third way

So far, the current prospect of a third grand coalition government (made up of CDU and SPD) seems to suggest a continuation of the principled pragmatist approach. A paper produced by SPD and CDU/CSU as a result of explorative talks, mentions Russia as a reason why a strong and united Europe is needed, and thus framing Russia principally as a challenge to Europe. For many, so long as Merkel remains chancellor, there is little reason to be concerned: she is considered to have been the torchbearer of an outspoken policy towards Russia. The SPD, however, has also experienced its moments of disillusionment with Russia – for instance, with acting foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel's fruitless attempt to mediate in the Ukraine conflict. Despite offering the carrot of an early lifting of sanctions, no reciprocal goodwill has been displayed by Russia. Furthermore, the three opposition parties – the Greens, the liberal FDP and the AfD – have very different approaches to Russia and will force the new government to put its

cards on the table in the next term. In addition, keeping the EU united on Russia policy will become an even more complex challenge: With upcoming elections in Italy, the doves in Russia policy will become even more dovish, and so will the hawks tend to become more hawkish. Striking a middle path – together with France – will be a task for the new German government.

In terms of Germany's future *Ostpolitik*, it is important to resist the temptation of "equidistance" between Washington and Moscow, especially in the times of Donald Trump. In a recent poll carried out by the Körber Foundation (October 2017), 42 per cent of Germans consider close relations with the US to be more important than close relations with Russia. Yet, 32 per cent still showed preference for Germany to have closer relations with Russia than the US. A relativisation of Washington and Moscow is unacceptable for German foreign policy, not only because Germany relies on the US and NATO for its own security but also since the idea of equidistance evokes associations of a "third" German way in international politics, which has more than once proven to be a dangerous deviation. Remaining firmly rooted in the western community must continue to be the fundamental pillar of Germany's *Ostpolitik* and its foreign policy in general, especially when western structures are at risk of crumbling.